Notice of the Final Oral Examination for the Degree of Master of Arts of

DONNA BUSH

BA (Carleton University, 1990)

“Staples Theory, Oil, and Indigenous Alternative Development in the Northwest Territories”

Department of Political Science

Wednesday, December 20, 2017
10:00 A.M.
David Turpin Building
Room A318

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. James Lawson, Department of Political Science, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Michael Asch, Department of Anthropology, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Martha McMahon, Department of Sociology, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Frank van Veggel, Department of Chemistry, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Staples theory has been used as a framework to explain the historical establishment and political economy of Canada and other “new” countries, based on the concept that Canada has been and continues to be built on an economy of resource extraction. The theory has been applied on both a macro and a micro scale to regions of Canada that have specialized in the extraction of cod, wheat, fur, and oil and gas. Two foundational academics of staples theory, Harold A. Innis and Mel Watkins, spent time in the northern region of Canada now known as the Northwest Territories (NWT) and, among other researchers, applied a staples approach to various periods of the region’s economic development.

The application of staples theory in northern Canada, however, is problematic, particularly in view of the territory’s predominantly Indigenous, Inuit, and Métis population. Both the positive impressions of the staples industry’s effects on the NWT economy and those that warn of the cyclonic nature of the boom-and-bust scenarios tend to ignore, or underplay, a fundamental reality in the NWT: the original political economy of the region was based on Indigenous values of communal trading and sharing in a subsistence economy. Most importantly, the Indigenous economy was managed, controlled and distributed by the Indigenous people as they lived on, and carefully managed, the land and resources of the North. A theoretical approach that centers on the extraction and commodification of resources in the North by white traders and settlers who take over the land, obscures the critical questions of who owns and cares for the land and how it is ‘developed’.

This thesis will focus on the application of staples theory in the NWT with examples from the experiences of the Dene in the Sahtu region with the oil-extraction industry in Norman Wells, NWT as well as those more recently with the diamond industry. In the 1960s and 70s, the Dene Nation in the NWT outlined a new and profound approach that challenged a number of assumptions of the settler world, including the settlers’ right to the land, to govern and to be in control of the economy, even the mode of economy. Mel Watkins, working with the Dene Nation, wove this Indigenous approach into an adapted staples theory, linking it with dependency theory and anti-colonialism. In the 1970s, the Dene Nation articulated a manifesto that outlined their demand to exist within northern Canada with full economic and political rights.

By examining the history of the region and the work of staples theorists, I will examine how staples theory has been applied. I will then review more recent developments within staples theory in conjunction with Indigenous activism and critical environmental issues and reflect on whether the staples theory framework is appropriate for the region. With the current Indigenous protest movement focusing less on reconciliation and more on a ‘politics of refusal’, it may be necessary to re-think the staples theory approach for the NWT and develop an approach that more closely examines the Dene mode of life.